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SUBJECT: VIETNAM CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: ETHNIC MINORITY ISSUES IN DAK
NONG

REF: HCMC 72

1. (SBU) Summary: EAP/MLS Desk Officer and Poloff visited Dak Nong February 24-26. Officials emphasized their commitment to religious freedom and economic and social development of the large ethnic minority community. Leaders of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and a local house church said that religious freedom conditions were substantially better than in neighboring Dak Lak; they were cautiously optimistic about further, gradual improvement. The USG team also met with seven ethnic minority voluntary returnees from Cambodia; although the returnees were coached on some of their responses, in private meetings they did not complain of mistreatment, and appeared relaxed and relatively prosperous. End Summary.

Dak Nong Government: We are Different from Dak Lak

2. (U) Nhu Do The, Standing Vice Chairman of the Dak Nong People's Committee, said that the province looked for USG involvement and assistance to accelerate development of the province. According to Nhu, the province has a per capita income 5.6 million VND (USD 350), with 34 percent of households falling under the GVN poverty line. Of these, slightly over half -- 53 percent -- are ethnic Kinh. 24 percent are indigenous ethnic minorities and 26 percent are ethnic minority migrants from other parts of Vietnam, especially ethnic Hmong from the Northwest Highlands. The province's annual rate of growth was 13 percent in 2004 and 2005, up from the nine percent earlier in the decade when the province was still part of neighboring Dak Lak. (Dak Nong province was created in January 2004.) In 2005, the province earned a modest USD 85 million in export revenue, primarily from coffee, rubber, pepper and cashews. The province had identified sizeable bauxite deposits; Chinese and Australian mining companies were conducting feasibility studies to assess the economic viability of recovery.

3. (SBU) Nhu said that province was working hard to ensure that economic development reached the 34 percent of province's 414,000 citizens that were ethnic minority. The province had established six ethnic minority boarding schools and had begun to develop a vocational training school for ethnic minority youth; the province was interested in international assistance in this effort. The province seeks to minimize tensions between the native ethnic minority population and new migrants by grouping the migrants into new villages and allocating them land. The province also wanted to build an ethnic minority community college to reduce the subsidy cost it incurs to send ethnic minority students to universities elsewhere in Vietnam. Provincial officials noted that ethnic minority students' level of education is low and limits their competitiveness. Even when they graduate from university, ethnic minority students have a hard time obtaining private sector jobs and must find employment in government or in state-owned enterprises; the private sector "only wants the best," he noted.

4. (SBU) Both Nhu and Bui Viet Phu, Head of the Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs, repeatedly stated that the province was implementing Vietnam's legal framework on religion proactively. The CRA Chairman was particularly positive about the impact of the new legal framework, saying it placed binding timelines on government officials and eliminated many previous legal inconsistencies.

15. (SBU) According to the officials, the province has 83,224 Catholics, 35,698 Protestants and 21,000 Buddhists. The province has allowed both the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and unregistered house churches to operate in the province. The province is working to register SECV "meeting points" as well as the small house church community, but must ensure that all activities are "purely religious." That vetting process is slower for recent ethnic minority migrants from the Northwest Highlands, in part because of the language barrier; few speak Vietnamese. Many ethnic minority individuals are recent converts and do not have "a thorough understanding" of religious practice, Phu maintained. Moreover, the vast majority of church workers were illiterate, limiting their "understanding of religion" as well as their ability to build a relationship with local and provincial-level government officials. That said, the province allowed the SECV to organize a training class for 32 pastor-candidates; once these pastors are ordained, they can be assigned to local churches, which could then be recognized officially. Since becoming a province in 2004, the provincial CRA has not refused a request from the SECV or the Catholic Church, the CRA Chairman asserted.

16. (SBU) Chairman Phu indicated that, prior to 2003, the "Dega Protestant" church was a factor in the ethnic minority community in the province. However, since the province created "favorable conditions" for the SECV to operate, the pull of the Dega Church has declined substantially, the CRA Chairman said.

17. (SBU) According to the CRA Chairman, Baptist and the Assembly of God denominations also had house churches in the province. While the province is facilitating their operation, it will not entertain their registration. The Chairman explained that, according to the legal framework, the organizations' national representatives (based in HCMC) would have to apply for registration at the central-level as the groups maintained house churches in more than one province. We pointed out to the Chairman that while his interpretation of the law appeared correct, other provinces, including HCMC, were in the process of registering house churches.

18. (SBU) Provincial officials acknowledged that Protestantism was the fastest growing religion among ethnic minority groups in Dak Nong. From their perspective, two factors explained the phenomenon: first, social pressure from other recent converts in the village. Second, ethnic minority women are driving the process to eliminate alcohol from their villages; traditional animist rites foster alcohol consumption among ethnic minority men.

Assembly of God

19. (SBU) Dieu Srong, Chief Pastor of the Assembly of God house church ushered us into the attic of his home that had been converted into worshiping space. Local officials waited downstairs, but were listening. The pastor told us that the AOG has 1500 members -- mostly ethnic minority -- in 28 house churches. Conditions prior to 2004 -- when the province was still part of Dak Lak -- were "very difficult," including incidents of forced conversion. Since the formation of Dak Nong, and particularly since the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism of February 2005, harassment has decreased markedly. Pressure eased further before Christmas 2005; he now can travel freely to cover all 28 AOG gathering points. Meetings with police responsible for religious affairs (section PA-38) are more relaxed as well.

110. (SBU) Despite the overall improvement, the pastor indicated that the AOG still faces problems at the village level. Some problems are triggered by friction between the converted and traditionalist -- animists -- in the ethnic minority community. However, local authorities sometimes exploit this tension to encourage animist village elders to oppose the spread of Protestantism.

SECV

111. (SBU) In a private meeting in his home, Pastor Rmah Loan, head of the SECV in Dak Nong, told us that the organization has 33,048 believers, of which 11,184 are baptized. (Loan said that all new converts must pass a test to demonstrate that they are "changed" and committed to their new faith before they can be baptized.) Of the SECV's 122 meeting points in the province, 13 are officially recognized. Loan confirmed that the province has facilitated the SECV's running of a training class for 32 pastor-candidates; those that graduate will be assigned to meeting points so that those churches could apply for recognition under Vietnam's legal framework for religion. In December 2005, SECV meeting points serving 8,000 ethnic Hmong from the Northwest Highlands were legalized. The SECV has been told that meeting points serving 1,000 ethnic Dao and Sanchi from the Northwest also will be legalized. For linguistic and cultural reasons, these groups have their own churches and evangelists.

12. (SBU) Loan added that the SECV hopes to run a second training course for another 39 pastor-candidates in the middle of 2006. The number of churches to be recognized is a source of friction between the SECV and the provincial government. According to Loan, the province wants to collapse three or four meeting points into one recognized church. The SECV wants to independently decide how many and which meeting points should be recognized as churches under the legal framework.

13. (SBU) As part of the recognition process of a meeting point, the SECV must hand over a list of worshipers; every month the SECV updates that list for local authorities. Loan commented that the updates really are not needed as police have a network of informers in the villages and monitor the membership of the SECV very closely. Looking to the future, Loan said that he wanted more freedom to worship, evangelize and to build churches -- approval of the application to build a permanent church in his village has been pending for two years.

Visits with Returnees -----

14. (SBU) Accompanied by the district People's Committee Chairman, a film crew and "other" officials, the team traveled to Bu Bong and Bu Dap villages in Dak Rlap district to meet with seven voluntary, "spontaneous" ethnic minority returnees from Cambodia. (See Appendix A for list of returnees visited.) We were allowed to meet them privately in their homes.

15. (SBU) All the returnees were ethnic Mnong Protestants who said they were affiliated with the SECV. All spoke Vietnamese. Many were uneducated, some finished 5th grade. They claimed that they were conned into fleeing by three other villagers -- the ringleader was Dieu Gai -- having been told that there were "riches" in Cambodia and warned that they faced arrest in Vietnam if they stayed. None of the returnees would say why they feared arrest. The returnees said that the three "instigators" were resettled in a third country, perhaps the United States. All the returnees called on the international community to close the refugee camps in Cambodia and return those resettled in third countries, saying that the families they left behind are suffering the absence of the primary breadwinner.

16. (SBU) There were no claims of abuse or mistreatment. One returnee (Dieu Xep, MTN-757) told us that he was kept in a government detention center for a month after return. He was questioned, but not mistreated. Another returnee (Dieu Dang, MTN-768) told us that he was held for four days upon return. All the returnees appeared relatively prosperous and relaxed, especially in comparison to returnees we saw in January 2006 visit to Kontum province. The Dak Nong returnees claimed to have between 4 to 10 hectares (roughly 10 to 25 acres) of land on which they grew coffee, rubber, cassava and other cash crops. Some had modest plots of rice paddy as well. Average income ranged from 14 to 20 million VND per year (USD 880 to 1250). All returnee homes were electrified with TVs. Some families owned motorbikes and tractors. One returnee (Dieu Lo -- MTN-752) had a concrete home given to him by the state after his return. Another returnee (Dieu Mpyuh, MTN-767) told us that his eldest son just completed compulsory military service.

17. (SBU) While some returnees said that religion played no part in their decision to flee and that they could practice freely, some indicated that the village faced tougher restrictions on religious activity prior to their flight. One returnee told us that prior to 2005, pastors were not allowed to preach in the village, the wife of another returnee told us that religious freedom conditions improved markedly only in September 2005 after authorities allowed an SECV church to be built.

18. (SBU) A number of returnees alleged that while they were in the refugee camps in Cambodia, a number of ethnic Jarai individuals urged them to support a separatist -- "Dega" -- agenda. When they decided to return to Vietnam, roughly 70 ethnic Jarai camp members threatened them with bodily harm if went through with their return plans, but camp police intervened to protect the Mnong. Returnee Dieu Lo said that UNHCR officials refused to facilitate the return of the Mnong, which is why they decided to go back on their own, taking a bus from the camp to the border and then crossing into Vietnam. He also alleged that some camp ringleaders had spoken to Montagnard Foundation President Kok Ksor via cell phone and that the USG should "bring him to justice," as he incites violence and riots in Vietnam.

19. (SBU) Comment: Government officials in Dak Nong struck us as relatively progressive and open -- especially for the Central Highlands. Although the returnees seemed coached in some of their responses, there were no indications of abuse. Unlike in Dak Lak, where many provincial leaders appeared consumed with the perceived threat of ethnic minority separatism, the focus in Dak Nong was more oriented towards poverty alleviation and development. In this regard, the pitch at the provincial-level

for USG assistance was the strongest that we have heard in the Central Highlands. One district-level leader said he could envision NGOs running rural development and micro-finance projects for ethnic minorities in his district, "with the right political backing." Moreover, although problems remain at both the provincial and village level, the province's approach on religious freedom also has been positive, particularly within the past six months. End Comment.

Appendix A: List of ethnic minority returnees met in Dak Nong:

MTN-752, Dieu Lo
MTN-755 Dieu Khuch (aka Dieu Quyt)
MTN-756 Dieu Glou
MTN-757 Dieu Xep
MTN 759 Dieu San
MTN 767 Dieu Mpyuh
MTN-768 Dieu Dang
WINNICK

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